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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT SPEAKER WANTS LARGE NATIONAL UNITY
GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, based on 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, in a 10/11 meeting with the Ambassador, said that he wanted the next cabinet to be a national unity government. Only by getting sufficient representation from the Christian opposition and Walid Jumblatt's bloc, he said, could Lebanon face the challenges posed by UNSC 1559. PM Hariri, he reported, met with him earlier that day, seeking Berri's support for a narrow, technocratic government; Berri rebuffed the PM, saying that broader political participation was essential to the new cabinet's ability to deal with the legislative elections law as well as other issues. Berri said that, public comments from Walid Jumblatt and Christian opposition figures notwithstanding, he believed it was possible to lure their representatives to the cabinet. Asked by the Ambassador about next steps, given widely divergent views among leading Lebanese figures on the next cabinet, Berri noted that Hariri would see President Lahoud again during the evening of 10/11 in an attempt to hammer out a cabinet deal. Berri would not predict what Lahoud and Hariri might decide, or even whether they could agree, but he emphasized that no deal on a cabinet is possible without Berri's parliamentary blessing.

¶2. (C) On spring 2005 legislative elections, Berri said that he cared less about the type of electoral districts to be drawn -- large (favored by Hariri) or small (favored by Maronite Patriarch Sfeir) -- as long as the same standard was applied across the country. But when pressed, Berri acknowledged that he preferred the larger governorate ("muhafeza") system as opposed to small "qada" districts. The governorates, he said, are more consistent with the Taif accord and, by inclusion of more than one sect in each governorate, help move Lebanon away from a confessional system of representation.

¶3. (C) Much of the hour-long meeting was devoted to Berri decrying UNSC 1559 as interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs and to Berri's attempt to convince the Ambassador that French and U.S. views toward implementation of UNSC 1559 have already diverged (with the U.S. softening its line, according to this theory). The Ambassador pushed back that the U.S. wants to see UNSC 1559 fully implemented, with a functioning cabinet addressing the needs of the Lebanese people rather than answering to Damascus. After giving a strong condemnation of Sunni extremism in Iraq and al-Qaida's activities worldwide, Berri also lamented what he described as U.S. neglect of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, arguing that what he believed to be the absence of U.S. strong leadership in pushing the Israelis and Palestinians toward a two-state solution fanned the flames of extremism.

¶4. (C) Comment: In arguing for a national unity government, Berri is more likely to be motivated by what is best for Berri and his Amal movement than what is best for Lebanon. Hariri's proposal for a narrow, technocratic government would likely leave out Amal figures; a technocratic government is also more likely to pursue Hariri's reform agenda at the expense of Berri's spoils and patronage instincts. In a larger, national unity government, however, Berri will have Amal ministers who potentially can be deal makers or deal breakers, giving the Shia leader more

influence on the direction of policy and debate with the cabinet. As the Ambassador told Berri, whether the cabinet is narrow and technocratic or larger and drawn from a broad political spectrum is not of interest to the USG. What we want to see is a cabinet that earns credibility among the Lebanese people by starting to address their needs. This would signal to us that Lebanon is beginning the process of moving toward compliance with UNSC 1559.

FELTMAN